Teaching and Learning Writing in ESL/EFL

Reviewed by Qiudong Li

For many learners of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL), writing is the most baffling of all language skills. A wealth of research has been conducted on teaching writing to ESL/EFL learners, but most studies focus exclusively upon learners’ language development, like Polio’s (2016) research into the interface between second language learning and writing and Hirsh’s (2021) specific examination of vocabulary acquisition through second language writing. However, these studies largely ignore learners’ writing development in areas such as logic and organization, which are commonly the focus with native English speakers. In response to this limitation, Dr. Rachael Ruegg’s newly published book Teaching and Learning Writing in ESL/EFL attempts to help teachers achieve a balance between language skills and writing skills in the process of teaching writing. Capitalizing on abundant research-informed teaching ideas from the extant literature plus the author’s personal teaching experiences, this book succeeds in providing practical guidelines and recommendations to teachers and learners of writing in ESL/EFL contexts.

Apart from a glossary and a list of references at the end, this book is comprised of eight chapters. Chapter 1 and Chapter 8 serve respectively as the introduction and the conclusion of the monograph. The remaining six chapters can be divided into two parts. The first part (Chapters 2–3) deals focally with a range of basic concepts in relation to writing tasks and...
writing topics. The second part (Chapters 4–7) guides readers through a journey from theory to practice that covers supporting students in writing, writing processes and strategies, feedback, and writing assessment.

As the introductory part of the book, Chapter 1 starts by pointing out that learning to write is 'a long and drawn-out process' (p. 6). By and large, ESL/EFL learners will experience three writing stages: language learning, developing written communication skills, and writing to learn content in English-medium programs. Then this chapter introduces four main approaches to teaching writing, including product approach, process approach, genre-based approach, and post-process approach. The chapter ends with an overview of the contents of the entire book.

In order to help teachers make informed decisions before asking students to write, Chapter 2 clearly explains different types of writing tasks, depending on genre, scope, and rhetorical mode. In particular, Ruegg strongly suggests that younger learners should put more time and effort into paragraph writing at earlier stages of language learning so as to avoid problems with essay writing throughout their tertiary studies. She further adds that argument writing should be prioritized over other types of writing, since it is 'overwhelmingly the most important mode of academic writing' (p. 39).

Chapter 3 provides guidance for students in selecting writing topics. Drawing on numerous studies on the advantages of writing about self-selected topics over teacher-assigned topics, this chapter encourages students to choose appropriate topics that really appeal to them, and then recommends effective practices for student-led topic selection. As an example, with different amounts of freedom, students can move from broad themes to specific writing topics or from concrete topics to abstract ones as they progress in language proficiency level. Meanwhile, topic familiarity is another crucial factor that students should carefully consider. Especially for those young and low-proficiency learners, more familiar topics are their preferred choices.

Although self-selection topics can increase students’ motivation to write, teachers’ role in supporting students to complete writing tasks cannot be ignored. Based on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), Chapter 4 mainly discusses how teachers provide scaffolding to students before and during writing with regard to content knowledge and language learning. The effective supporting activities include assigning a reading or listening task about the same topic, partial writing, replication writing, and collaborative writing.

Chapter 5 probes into effective processes and strategies used for writing a text. After briefly describing the five-stage writing process model proposed by Gardner (2005), this chapter shifts readers’ attention to the first two
pre-writing stages, i.e., assessing the writing situation and exploring and planning ideas, and elaborates on the different pre-writing processes involved in writing essays and research papers. Closing the chapter, the author stresses again that the two types of writing serve disparate purposes, in that the former is more suitable for writing to learn language, while the latter plays a more significant part in writing to learn content.

Moving on to the post-writing stages of Gardner’s (2005) model, Chapter 6 dwells on several aspects of facilitating feedback to help students revise and edit their work. Initially, it is proposed that feedback should be best provided in multi-draft writing with repeated indications of students’ problems. Next, by comparing the effects of teacher feedback, peer feedback, and self-feedback on students’ writing performance, this chapter advises teachers to incorporate the other two equally useful sources of feedback to reduce their burdensome work. Following this, the chapter examines a range of modes and methods of feedback delivery, arguing that indirect forms of feedback are more effective to engage students cognitively in subsequent drafting. Then the chapter explores what feedback should concentrate on. The ideal starting point for teachers is to offer the type of feedback that students would like to receive, i.e., individualized feedback. As such, students are more likely to pay attention to feedback. Other methods of encouraging students’ active engagement with feedback include written reflection feedback and error logs.

Also closely connected to the post-writing processes, Chapter 7 delves into writing assessment. By making a distinction between tests and classroom assessments of writing, this chapter highlights that the latter contributes directly to further learning, i.e., assessment for learning. Then the chapter addresses three questions on effective classroom-based writing assessment: Who should assess classroom writing tasks? What should be assessed in writing? How should writing be assessed? These questions uncover critical insights into assessment as learning, assessing language accuracy and writing skills, constructive alignment, and developing analytic rating rubrics, just to name a few.

As the concluding chapter of the book, Chapter 8 reviews a succinct summary of the main findings discussed from Chapter 2 to Chapter 7. This chapter then outlines several fundamental principles for writing teachers to follow for curricular innovation. One of the most impressive principles is that teachers are expected to experiment with different approaches to writing so that students can maximize their potential to learn.

Taken together, as one practice-oriented volume of the Pedagogical Content Knowledge for English Language Teachers series, Teaching and Learning Writing in ESL/EFL is a welcome addition to the collection of ESL/EFL teachers of writing, in that it adopts a more balanced approach to
writing pedagogy. No matter whether students are in the stage of writing to learn language or writing to learn content, teachers can directly consult the book for teaching writing in the fields of Second Language Acquisition, English for Academic or Specific Purposes, English-Medium Instruction, and Writing Across the Curriculum. More importantly, the monograph presents various writing theories, research findings, and teaching practices in an impartial and objective manner, and advises teachers to develop their own teaching methods by synthesizing useful resources from each chapter.

Another strength of the book lies in the emphasis on learner-centeredness which resonates throughout the entire text. For example, it is suggested that teachers should allow students to choose their own topics for writing (Chapter 3), take an active role in receiving individualized feedback (Chapter 6), implement peer assessment and self-assessment (Chapter 7). By doing so, the book not only promotes learner autonomy, but also substantiates the author’s claim that ‘keeping up learners’ motivation and confidence becomes all the more important’ (p. 3).

In terms of structure, two to five pre-reading questions posed at the beginning of each chapter make this monograph more reader-friendly and accessible. For one thing, these questions give readers a basic overview of writing issues to be discussed in each chapter. For another, they help readers reflect on their previous teaching experiences prior to reading.

Nonetheless, the book is not without weakness. One of the most obvious disadvantages is the absence of teachers’ own voices, particularly their emotional experiences in providing corrective feedback and assessing students’ writing, though their burden caused by these activities has been mentioned several times in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. Furthermore, the book would become more informative and innovative if it had touched upon the use of cutting-edge technology in writing instruction. Actually, with the development of artificial intelligence and big data technology in recent years, many online writing platforms have been specially designed to facilitate automated feedback and assessment in ESL/EFL contexts, like the Writing ePlatform developed by Hong Kong Education Bureau (Lee, 2017) and iWrite System by National Research Center for Foreign Language Education in China’s Mainland. Hence, more pages could be devoted to whether and how these web-based platforms affect students’ writing performance in the second edition of the book.

As a whole, the book makes a valuable contribution to writing teachers’ professional development. Despite some minor demerits, it still proves to be a practical manual for ESL/EFL teachers at all levels of education, especially novice and pre-service teachers who aspire to enhance their teaching skills and knowledge in writing classes. Even those postgraduate students in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) or
Applied Linguistics will also find some fascinating research topics from the book.

References


